

Fertility, Conjuncture, Difference: Anthropological Approaches to the Heterogeneity of Modern Fertility Declines

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Demographic transition theory assumes that, given similar socio-economic conditions of modernity in “developing” countries, fertility rates will decline to a statistical level of 2.1 births per woman as occurred in European societies. Demographic analyses show fertility rates both decreasing and increasing. This heterogeneity of fertility rates is a “central problematic in the study of population” (ix) that cannot be resolved using quantitative census survey. Ten authors address this contradiction utilizing demographic (quantitative/macro/statistical) reasoning and ethnographic (qualitative/micro/interpretive) methods and analyses. The editors’ introduction presents an informative overview of demography and ethnography to focus on the work of anthropological demographer Jennifer Johnson-Hanks whose theory of “vital conjuncture” informs each contributors’ analysis. Vital conjunctures are a “complex intersection” of current sociocultural and personal forces people consider when making reproductive (and other life) decisions for now and for their future. These ethnographically rich studies—six in Africa and one each in Tajikistan, Northern Italy (with Greece and Spain), and Cambodia, discover how pressures of kin, gender roles, family, marriage, employment inform peoples’ decision-making processes and agency. These insights make sense of outcomes that run contrary to demographic transition theory.

Anthropological demography means “there is simply more to say than there would be if one stuck to a single discipline” (Heady 155) and space constraints mean I can only hint at the vital conjunctions informing fertility decisions in these case studies. Analysing a century of Catholic mission documents in four east African states, show how pressures of colonization redefined local reproductive mores to reflect western mores of sexuality, family form and reproductive behaviour (Walters). Similarly, Namibian women’s fertility is impacted by changing moral values embedded in developing class formations (Pauli). Two groups of Tajik women, whose differing perspectives on reproducing group/identity or reproducing the Soviet state, resulted in different patterns of fertility increase (Roche and Hohmann). In rural northern Italy villages, a confluence of forces exposes a counterintuitive ultra-low fertility among non-migrants compared to higher rates among villagers

migrating for urban employment (Heady). Powerful social and religious ideals inform Senegalese gender relations and discourses. Men speak against stopping or delaying pregnancies publicly upholding what Muslim religious and social values, while privately leaving fertility decisions to their wives whose decisions rest on complex reasons of family economics and health (Randall, Mondain, and Diagne). A nuanced analysis of individual agency, social structures, and “the wider flux of the life trajectory” (van der Sijpt 208) shows Cameroonian women take best advantage of particular local contingencies to navigate personal and cultural issues when making reproductive decisions. In Botswana, reproductive decision making is not always about how many children but about “when, how and with whom to have children” (Bochow 222). Kroecker’s Lesotho study reveals sexuality to be a male dominated domain, however, most men are migrant workers. Women manage their sexuality using contraceptives to separate sexuality from reproduction, to ensure unintended pregnancies cannot interrupt their employment, and to space pregnancies. Women’s contraceptive use can result in more rather than fewer children during their reproductive life (266). Charbit and Petit’s penultimate chapter reviews historic “misunderstandings and quarrels” defining disciplinary relations that demographers and anthropologists need to enable a “fruitful interdisciplinary dialogue” and “new and promising avenues for research” (323). Finally, Johnson-Hanks revisits her concept of vital conjunctions to discuss how contributors push forward understanding of the heterogeneity of events, sociocultural pressures, opportunities and timing that together inform reproductive choice making.

These rich interdisciplinary studies show fertility decisions are not made according to rational choice economic theory and a vague concept of “modernity.” Each case study here presents cultural and personal factors coalesced around reproductive decisions that women and men consider when making life decisions. The editors and contributors are to be congratulated for this splendid and insightful contribution to understanding reproductive decision making and, not least, the benefits of interdisciplinarity. Highly recommended.